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Archaeological
Institute
of America

WHO BUILT THE ARCH OF CONSTANTINE?

II

The Frieze

Before continuing the detailed examination of the sculptured decoration in its relation to the structure of the arch, which was barely begun in my first paper (*A.J.A.* XVI, 1912, 3, pp. 368 ff.), I shall give a brief report of the work done on the arch during the intervening year. In October, 1912, I presented to the International Archaeological Congress in Rome my theory that the arch was built by Domitian, mutilated at his death, restored and used as a general arch of triumph until rededicated to Constantine. Thanks to the cordial and efficient coöperation of Comm. Corrado Ricci, it was possible to prepare in the course of only four days special casts and photographs for the Congress. But as they illustrated only the lower parts it seemed afterwards indispensable to test my theories by a close examination of every foot of the surface up to the top of the attic by means of scaffolds. Only by this searching study could the many puzzles be solved. Comm. Ricci granted his permission, and the Office for the Preservation of Monuments placed its corps of expert scaffold builders at my disposal for several weeks in April and May, 1913. A several-storied movable tower on wheels made it possible to return again and again to the same detail. Above it permanent platforms were built on the attic. No part of the surface was left unexamined or untouched. Even the thickness of the slabs was ascertained wherever there were cracks or holes allowing the insertion of a slender steel rod. Casts and photographs were taken of details that bore upon the problems under discussion. An experienced archaeological architect, G. Malgherini, took the measurements and profiles for a detailed series of architectural

drawings; finding, incidentally, that what had thus far been published was most inaccurate. An expert examination was begun of the marble used in various parts, in order to ascertain any differences in quarry and quality. Archaeologists and art critics were freely invited to take part in the examination and to test my theories and statements.

The arch has, therefore, been for the first time studied with the care and closeness that it deserves. It was inevitable that new problems should arise in the course of this study, and yet, while I found occasion to modify some of my opinions and to make some reservations,[1] it has not brought any fundamental change in my views. I have gathered a greater wealth of detail to prove the pre-Constantinian origin, and even the pre-Constantinian date (third century) of that latest addition to the structure, the attic. The materials have been gathered for a special volume; what will be used in these articles is only the part that bears on the problems of structure and age.

In regard to the contention in my previous article (p. 375), that it would have been against Roman law and custom to have built an arch to Constantine for victories in a civil war, the force of my argument was impaired by a printer's error which made me say that Ammianus Marcellinus condemned Constantine for erecting arches in Gaul to commemorate internecine victories. What I actually wrote, of course, was not Constantine, but *Constantius*, his son, and if the contemporary historian condemned Constantius for such an improper innovation, it is unthinkable that he should have done so with a new arch of Constantine of this very character before his eyes.

In my previous article I examined only the two late medallions on the east and west ends. I shall now examine the frieze.

The frieze is not continuous, as in the arch at Beneventum, but is in sections, as in the arch of Septimius Severus. Though it extends around the entire arch it has no unity either in height or style. There are six sections: one over each of the

[1] I found no travertine core (p. 381); everything within sight or touch is marble of various qualities up to the attic, where the structure is later and changes to brick and concrete. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of the use of travertine in the mass of the masonry, but it cannot be proved.

minor arcades on each face and one across each end. Those on the east and west ends belong to a triumphal procession, with an emperor entering Rome, and they overlap around the four corners on to the main faces as far as the first pilasters. The two sections on the south face represent victories leading up to the triumph; those on the north face give the popular festivities in Rome after the triumphal entrance. The universally accepted theory has been that all the parts of the frieze date from Constantine's time. The two scenes on the south are interpreted as the Capture of Verona (or of Susa), on his way to Rome, and as the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian bridge. The north scenes are then his proclamation to the people from the Rostra in the Roman Forum and his distribution of the Congiarium after his triumphal entrance.

A dissenting voice has been raised by Mr. Wace[1] in a very interesting paper. Largely on the basis of the substitution of a second imperial head for the first one in three out of the six reliefs and also of the fact that Constantine did not celebrate a triumph, he ascribes the four sections of the triumphal procession, the Rostra proclamation and the Congiarium, to the next previous emperor who enjoyed a triumph; that is, to Diocletian. He leaves to Constantine only the two south scenes: the capture of Verona and the Battle of the Milvian bridge, because here he finds that there is no substitution of a second imperial head. He thinks that the four Diocletianic reliefs were removed from some triumphal monument of that emperor and finds substantiation of this in the breaks that run continuously along the base line of the reliefs, detaching them from the structure of the arch. I do not know how much attention has been paid to Mr. Wace's theory. I found myself obliged to discard it as more than improbable. The same break which runs along the base line of the reliefs he thinks Diocletianic runs also along the base line of those he thinks Constantinian. In the Battle of the Milvian bridge, where he does not believe the emperor to have been present at all, there are not only remains of the emperor's figure, but proofs of the substitution of a second imperial head; which, according to

[1] A. J. B. Wace, 'Studies in Roman Historical Reliefs' in the *Papers Brit. School at Rome*, IV, p. 270 sqq.

Mr. Wace's own theory, would be fatal to an ascription of this scene to Constantine. This one fact is sufficient to make his theory untenable. It has also against it facts of style and technique. He grouped the Congiarium and Rostra scenes, which are of one style, with the Triumphal Processions which are of quite different technique; whereas the two battle scenes, which he places by themselves, are undoubtedly by the same hands as the Triumph! Nor does it seem at all probable that Constantine should have allowed the mutilation of a monument built only ten or twelve years before in honor of Diocletian.

We may then conclude: (1) that no part of the frieze came from a monument of Diocletian, and (2) that, since both the basal break and the mutilation of the emperor's head are characteristic of all the reliefs on the main fronts, they must all have been treated in this way at the same time.

What must be asked is this: Is the mutilation of the emperor's heads sufficient to exclude the Constantinian origin of all these frieze reliefs? Does the break along the base line show that they were brought from some other monument; or does it show, on the contrary, that they were carved *in situ* and that the decorative work underneath the break was added? Does not the evident stylistic difference between the Congiarium and Rostra scenes and the rest show that these two scenes belong to a different period and to another emperor than the triumphal and battle scenes? If all the scenes are pre-Constantinian and attributable to more than one emperor, does their technique afford any indication of their date?

These questions will be answered in the course of an examination of each relief, beginning with the scenes preceding the triumph.

I. South Face. (*a*) *Siege of Verona* (Fig. 1). The effect of the base-line cut just under the feet and cutting away the base on which they rested, though far riskier, was but little more damaging than in the Battle of the Milvian bridge; which is remarkable, seeing that there were so many feet almost or entirely in the round. Only one figure lost its feet: the soldier advancing alone to the right under the city walls. The reason for his mutilation would seem to be that the block immediately beneath him took an upward curve instead of

following in a straight line parallel with the left-hand and central cornice blocks. This involved a miscalculation, and the necessity of cutting away the feet of the only figure in the lower part of this block in order to secure, according to which theory one adopts, the insertion either of the frieze block or that of the spandrel block. It will be noted that an attempt was made to conceal the shortening of the legs by thinning them off in a very clumsy way.

There are two details which bear on the question as to whether this section was inserted or was carved *in situ:* these details are the bow of the middle archer and the lance of the soldier below him. This middle archer was carved on two slabs of the upper course. His left arm is extended so that it is mostly on the right-hand slab, holding the bow, of which the top remains against the frame. The right arm, holding arrow and string, with its forearm in the round, was, with bow and arrow, partly on one and partly on the other slab. It would have been impossible to move these slabs after carving. The damage to these delicate details which we see at present was presumably done not in ancient but in mediaeval times. Still, as it might be argued that



FIGURE 1.—ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; SOUTH FACE; SIEGE OF VERONA.

it could have been done by transportation, it is lucky that the soldier below the archer, who is carved both on the upper and lower courses, is holding a lance whose delicate shaft is cut in the round against the upper slab and connects closely and perfectly with the continuation of the shaft on the lower slab. Here at least the perfect preservation of this detail in unrestored condition is enough to prove that the slabs were all carved *in situ*, and that the damage to the archer's bow was not due to transportation. The head of the emperor, who stands to the left, with a flying Victory behind him, has not been treated as in the other cases to be studied. It is mutilated, but there was no provision for a substitution in ancient times of a second head. It is extremely difficult to decide what this difference means. Does it mean that this section does not belong to the same time and refer to the same emperor as the east and west sections? If the head was that of Constantine, must we not infer that the mutilation was accidental? But how can the accident theory seem plausible in the face of the fact that every other head in the composition is intact? It is easier to suppose that the head was made unrecognizable and that it was by mere carelessness that no second head was substituted. This supposition will be confirmed by the examination of the emperor's figure in the corresponding scene of the Victory of the Milvian bridge, as the two scenes certainly belong to the same series.

Of course this theory would exclude the title "Siege of Verona" as the subject of the relief.

SOUTH FACE. (*b*) *Battle of the Milvian Bridge* (Fig. 2). This scene is more seriously damaged than any of the series, especially where the emperor stood. The photograph reproduced in Figure 3 was taken for the purpose of showing the line of cleavage along the base, which is continuous, and just as clearly as in the other cases posterior to the carving. The peculiar thing about the emperor in this scene is that he has totally disappeared and that "his place knows him no more." He stood between the Virtus who advances to the right over the arch and the river god, and the winged Victory beyond, whose head is turned backward as she leads the emperor onward. Of the emperor himself who occupied the vacant

space between Virtus and Victory, there remain only the two feet and the outline of some drapery against the background below the place where the knees were. Also, the fractures show where the outlines of the figure were. Especially conclusive is the cavity made where the head was, showing the intention, at least, of substituting a second head. It is curious that nobody appears to have noticed these facts. They either think, as Mr. Wace does, that the emperor was not present or else they see him in one of the soldiers in front of Victory. That the emperor was actually represented and that his head was hammered away as in the Triumph, the Congiarium, and the Rostra scenes, completes the upsetting of Mr. Wace's hypothesis.

In both of these scenes, while the figures are heavy and clumsy, there is considerable action, energy, and some expression. This is particularly true of the archers, of some of the horsemen, and of the Virtus. The marking of the pupils of the eyes is one of the technical points of difference between these reliefs and those of the north face, where the eyeballs are smooth, and there is no attempt, as here, at expression.

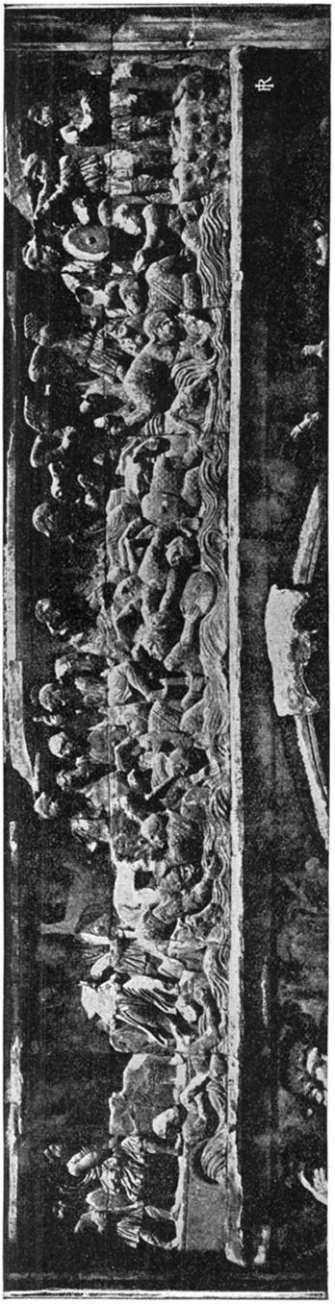


FIGURE 2. — ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; SOUTH FACE; BATTLE OF THE MILVIAN BRIDGE.

A good argument against the supposition that these scenes might have been brought from another monument is that they are so composed as not to have fitted any position but one of exactly their present length. One can imagine all the other four sections of the frieze as longer or shorter without fundamental disturbance, but the Milvian bridge scene in particular cannot be imagined as changed by addition or subtraction. It was designed for its present place, without a doubt. If it is pre-Constantinian, then the arch is also pre-Constantinian. I



FIGURE 3. — DETAIL OF FIGURE 2.

keep on using the term "Battle of the Milvian Bridge," though if the scene is pre-Constantinian, some other battle at a river must be selected as the theme.

II. EAST FRIEZE. *Triumphal Entrance of the Emperor, preceded by the Army* (Fig. 4). No continuous cornice frames the top; there is only a cornice strip under the medallion and connected with it. The cornice that serves as a base to the frieze is an important factor. Its lines, where they are preserved, are straight; its curved surface is even and of good outline. This is in strong contrast to the corresponding cornices on the main faces, and shows an earlier date. The cornice is cut in the same blocks that form the lower half of the figures

of the frieze. It will be noticed that this argues in favor of the theory that this eastern section of the frieze was carved *in situ*. Two other arguments for the same theory are: that the frieze is cut in two normal courses of marble blocks, of the same average height as the rest of the building blocks of the arch; and that the figures are cut back instead of projecting in relief from the structural line. This latter argument I have already used as tending also to show that the frieze was not planned when the arch was built, as otherwise the blocks on which it was to be carved would have been set in projection, according to the common custom.

The next point is the head of the emperor, seated in the chariot to the extreme left. The head has disappeared; not only that, but the hollow in the neck shows that the original head had in ancient times been replaced by a second imperial head. Now a technical comparison shows absolute identity of style between this section of the frieze and the already examined two sections on the south face — the Capture of Verona and the Battle of the Milvian bridge. It would follow from this clear substitution of a second imperial head that the original work could not be Constantinian, and if this is true of the eastern frieze with



FIGURE 4. — ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; EAST FRIEZE; TRIUMPHAL ENTRANCE OF EMPEROR.



FIGURE 5.—ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; WEST FRIEZE; TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION.

the emperor's triumphal entrance, then it is also true of the scenes on the south face and the west end. These scenes, therefore, cannot be incidents in the life of Constantine, but must be incidents in the life of whatever preceding emperor was commemorated in this east frieze. Perhaps the details will give some hint as to who this emperor was: the presence of camels and mules, the type of captured or carried standards, the costumes.

III. WEST FRIEZE. *Triumphal Procession with Captives and Booty* (Fig. 5). This face is in not nearly as good condition as the east face, apparently on account of the internal staircase at this end, which seems to have led both in ancient times and in the late Renaissance to considerable reconstruction, remodelling, and mutilation. This is shown in several ways: by the modern doorways, the irregular joints, the difference in the size, quality, and finish of certain blocks, such as those above the frieze on the right; the rough openings cut to give air and light to the staircase. This remodelling involved the insertion of antique fragments, especially a cornice block near the base of the staircase, which has been used as an argument for the Constantinian date of the arch, whereas it merely shows that the staircase was either built or remodelled at the time of the construction of the

attic, which was either under Constantine or in the latter half of the third century, if my theory is correct.

The ancient remodelling would seem to have been done when the frieze was carved, and in this case would antedate Constantine. A strong indication is in the arrangement of the base, which is entirely different from that of the east frieze. The base cornice is carved on the top of the course below the frieze instead of in the lower course of the frieze itself. The narrow band along the top of the frieze, which existed in the east frieze but was started so far back as to be inconspicuous, is here kept forward. The reason for this, however, is evident. It is that on the east end the figures are smaller and in two rows, superposed in rough perspective, so that the listel must recede in order not to overshadow the upper rear row of figures. This makes it the more noticeable that on the west frieze, where there is a single line of larger figures, the relief is much lower and the listel is flush with the face of the arch, that *at the right end there is no listel at all.* This is due to the fact that the two blocks in the course above this part of the frieze, which I have already noted as of a different finish (and which are probably of a finer-grained marble), are laid on a level below the rest of the course by four centimetres, just the width of this narrow band, so that in order to keep the figures of uniform size at this end it was necessary to carry them up to the full height of the slab.

At this point comes a significant observation. Two of the Roman legionaries in this section are carrying standards captured from the enemy. One is surmounted by a nude male figure; the other by a draped female figure. We might call them, for convenience, Heracles and Nike, as their type is classic. Now *the heads of these delicate statuettes touch the lower edge of the structural block* above the frieze. This bears conclusively on the question whether this frieze was carved *in situ* or was brought from some other monument and inserted in the masonry. Any architect will, I think, agree that if this block of the frieze had been already carved, it would have been impossible to use it in building the arch and to superimpose the block above it without fracturing these figurines. The same applies in a lesser degree to the crests of the four soldiers' hel-

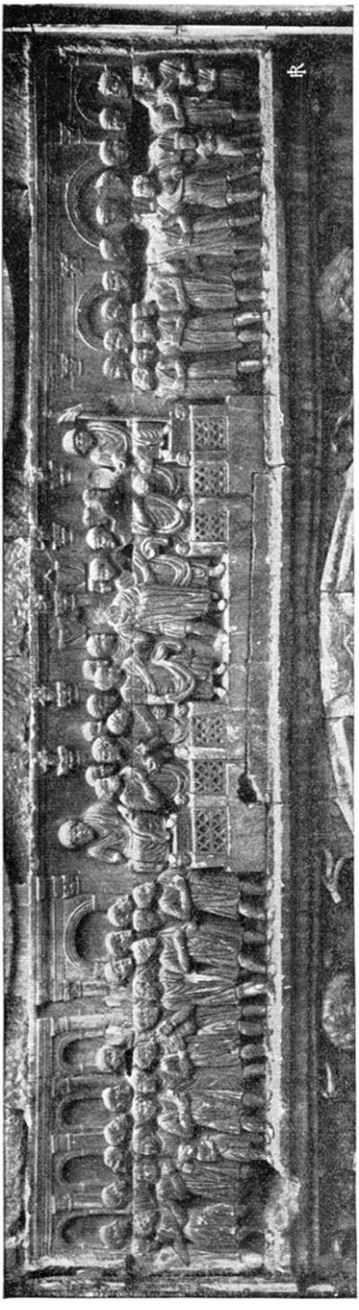


FIGURE 6.—ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; NORTH FACE; EMPEROR ON THE ROSTRA.

mets. This would dispose of Mr. Wace's theory that the frieze was brought here from a monument of Diocletian. Against this theory as applied to the other frieze at the east end is the fact that the frieze is there cut in the same block as the base cornice which is an integral part of the structure and can hardly have been brought from elsewhere.

IV. NORTH FACE. (*a*) *The Emperor on the Rostra*, addressing the people (Fig. 6). The break along the base line, instead of being below the feet of the figures, as it is on the south face, cuts across their legs at the ankles or above them, both here and in the Congiarium scene. In the centre the line of the cut is on a higher level through the base of the Rostra, along the entire length of the central block of the cornice below. Why is this so? The most plausible explanation seems to be that this was done in order to allow of more width for this cornice block which otherwise would have been so slender as to be easily broken in the centre. This explanation carries with it the assumption that this cornice block was inserted *after* the carving of the frieze,

and if this block, then the rest of the cornice and the spandrel sculptures. In support of this is the evident fact that the surface of the Rostra is carefully finished except only the part of it represented on this cornice block, where the surface is quite rough and done at a different and later time. The same crudeness appears in the handling of the upper part of the other two cornice blocks on which the figures of the frieze stand. The feet of the figures, below the break, are not the original feet; that is so clear as not to require argument. Not a single foot is carefully finished, in the style of the rest of the figure. In some cases, especially on the extreme right, there is not even an attempt made to fashion any feet below the break. In fact the fracture in some cases is so far above the base of the ankle that to carve new feet would have meant attaching them almost to the base of the calf of the leg. About 15 per cent of the lower leg was cut away. In so far as the frieze itself is concerned, and its connection with the cornice, the balance of evidence is in favor of its carving *in situ* and its mutilation when the spandrel decoration was added. This question will be more fully studied in connection with the spandrels.

The head of the emperor, who stands in the centre, was hammered off, and both background and neck hollowed out to receive a second head, now lost, if we assume that it was ever actually put in place.

NORTH FACE. (*b*) *The Imperial Congiarium* (Fig. 7). The emperor, seated on a throne and surrounded by his court, is acclaimed by the populace, while the routine work of handing out the gifts is carried on in four offices on either side. The break runs across the base in a perfectly straight line. It is even more evident here than in the preceding scene that the lower part of the figures has been cut away. I had a special photograph (Fig. 8) taken with a slight downward tilt in order to show that all the figures lost their ankles or even more, and that only in a few cases was any attempt made to replace the lost feet, even in the crudest way. The injury to the legs in some cases included a break higher than necessary. The technique is the same as in the previous relief. There is no expression; the attempt at action is like the attitudinizing of



FIGURE 7. — ARCH OF CONSTANTINE; NORTH FACE; IMPERIAL CONGIARIUM.

puppets in a punch and Judy show. The treatment of hair and eyes differs entirely from that of the south face. The art is far poorer; one would be tempted, stylistically, to call it post-Constantinian.

The head of the emperor has disappeared. As in the previous relief there have been two successive heads, the head last lost having been set in the cavities of neck and background which had been hammered out to a considerable depth.

The same relation to the spandrels and cornice obtains here as in the previous case.

Just a word about an insignificant part of the frieze, which seems always to have been passed over without remark, though it has an interesting bearing on the whole question: I mean the returns of the triumphal procession around the four corners of the main faces up to the pilasters. There is but little room, only for a horseman, a horseman and a footman, or a couple of foot soldiers; yet these short reliefs may help toward certain conclusions. They are cut in the same marble blocks as the beginning and end figures of the main line of triumphal procession, so they favor the theory that the processional scenes were carved *in situ*. Their base line is on the

same level as that of the big frieze of the north and south faces, but their upper line is on a considerably higher level, which, if continued along these faces, would have intersected the base of the medallion frames.

There is another suggestion. Had the designer of the arch planned to carve a frieze at this point when the arch was built, he would certainly have made the two courses in which it was to be carved of exactly the same height, so that the figures would correspond in size at all points. As we see, this was not done. The top of the second course over the minor arcades is



FIGURE 8. — DETAIL OF FIGURE 7.

on a lower level than that of the corresponding course beyond the framing pilasters near the corners, so that any one running his eye along the main face, can see at a glance that the cavalry and infantry in the returns at the corners, and belonging to the Triumph, reach a higher level. This is another argument against the theory that the frieze was cut when the arch was built, to supplement the projection argument, and favors the pre-Constantinian date for the structure.

If one takes the trouble to analyze the grouping of the three decorative elements above each minor arcade, — spandrels, frieze, and medallions, — what is the impression one receives? Is it not that the designer was hampered and cramped in some way? If he could have set the medallions at any point in the

structure, why did he set them so low that he was obliged to flatten the circle of their base most ungracefully in order to make room for the frieze? And if he was free to set the frieze where he chose, why did he crowd it down on the archway so closely as not to give himself the room to run the cornice on an even line back of the keystone? The arch of Severus shows the normal distance between archivolts and cornice. Once it is admitted that the medallions had been in place long before the carving of the frieze and spandrels, the puzzle explains itself.

What seem to be the results of this study of the six sections of frieze?

In five sections the emperor is present. In each case his head is mutilated; in one of these cases it was made unrecognizable and in the other four another imperial head was substituted. As the only remaining section is part of the triumphal procession and is in the same style, it cannot be separated from the rest. Therefore, whatever this mutilation of the emperor entails is entailed for all six sections.

What is this consequence? Unless we suppose the arch to have been mutilated in favor of some emperor subsequent to Constantine, which seems unlikely,[1] the consequence is the following dilemma. Either the entire frieze was brought from other monuments, dedicated to other emperors, whose heads

[1] *Did Constantius mutilate his father's arch?*

For the sake of argument, and in order to exhaust every possible hypothesis, I would offer the suggestion, merely as a suggestion to be taken into consideration, that when the Emperor Constantius entered Rome in triumph in April, 357, he may have been guilty of mutilating his father's arch, and in some cases have substituted his own portrait for that of his father. Ammianus Marcellinus describes quite cynically this absurd travesty of the older triumphs, and possibly the emperor distributed a *Congiarium* and assembled the people in the Forum for a remission of taxes, after having entered in triumphal procession with imaginary captives and counterfeit booty. If it should be admitted that in order to commemorate this event certain scenes on the arch were made to apply to Constantius, then it would still be possible to connect Constantine with the "Siege of Verona" and the "Battle of the Milvian bridge" because the mutilated emperor in these scenes might then be Constantine.

Constantius remained only a month in Rome, however, leaving in May, and in view of his absolute indifference to the city both before and after this visit, and his unpopularity there, it seems hardly worth while to consider this suggestion at all seriously.

were removed or mutilated so as to use Constantine's head in their place; or else the frieze was carved *in situ* and the same process was employed.

The examination has shown that of these two alternatives the latter should be adopted because of proofs given in more than one relief that transportation of the finished reliefs without fracturing details that are still intact would have been impossible, and these proofs are supported by the improbability of securing from the spoils of other monuments appropriate scenes that would exactly fit the length of the places to be decorated, as well as by other minor arguments that need not be repeated.

If the entire frieze, then, was carved *in situ*, it was carved in pre-Constantinian times, as is proved by the mutilation and substitution of the imperial heads. Was it all carved at the same time? Were the original imperial heads all of the same predecessor of Constantine? We have found that a well-defined difference in style and technique separates the frieze into two groups. In one group are the battle-scenes on the south face, the two short ends, and the returns around the ends with the triumphal procession. In the second group are the Rostra and Congiarium scenes on the north face. The two groups, having been carved at quite different times, presumably refer to two different emperors, both of whose portraits were destroyed to be replaced by heads of Constantine.

It would be idle to speculate at present as to the identity of these two predecessors of Constantine, except that on stylistic grounds they can hardly antedate the middle of the third century. The important and fundamental fact is that the frieze, if these premises are correct, proves the existence of the arch before Constantine.

A. L. FROTHINGHAM.

PRINCETON, September, 1913.